



**ASSYRIAN**  
**BAS-RELIEFS**

at the  
Bowdoin College  
Museum of Art

**Bowdoin College  
Museum of Art  
photographs by  
Dennis Griggs**

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**Cover: *Winged  
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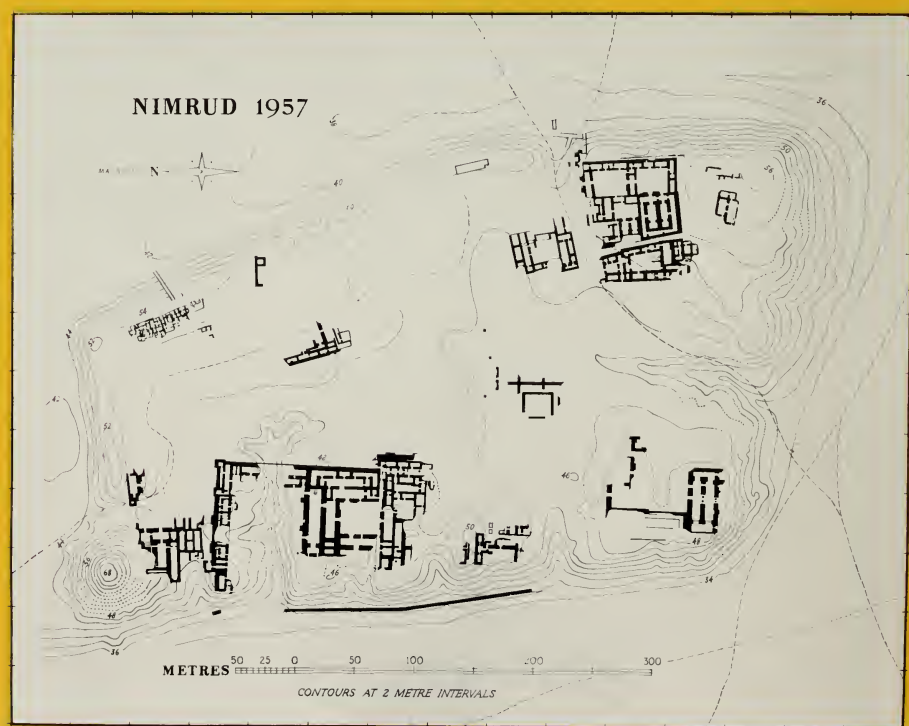


# ASSYRIAN **BAS-RELIEFS**

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Barbara N. Porter

Bowdoin College Museum of Art  
1989



**T**he great stone figures that today line the rotunda of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art were carved more than 2500 years ago for the palaces and temples of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.), ruler of the empire of Assyria, centered in what is now northern Iraq. An energetic soldier, Assurnasirpal II conducted campaigns against the rich cities of North Syria, gaining control of trade to and from the Mediterranean.

Rich in booty, slaves, and exotic raw materials from his conquests, Assurnasirpal began construction of a new capital, to be known as Kalhu (Biblical Calah, modern Nimrud). Construction began as early as 879 B.C., the fifth year of Assurnasirpal's reign, and was to continue almost until his death twenty years later. The city, a symbol of Assyria's growing power as well as a center of government, was built on a massive scale. Its encircling walls, crowned with more than a hundred towers, were thirty-nine feet thick and five miles long. Massive gateways led into a center inhabited by some 16,000 people, most of them deportees brought from lands Assurnasirpal had conquered.

Within the walls, in the southwest corner of the city, workmen raised a high mound of some sixty acres, towering over the lower city. On this heavily fortified citadel Assurnasirpal built temples, public buildings, and a great palace to serve as his royal residence and as the administrative center of the empire. It was to decorate the walls of this building, the Northwest Palace, that Assurnasirpal commissioned the carving of more than two hundred stone panels—including those now at Bowdoin.

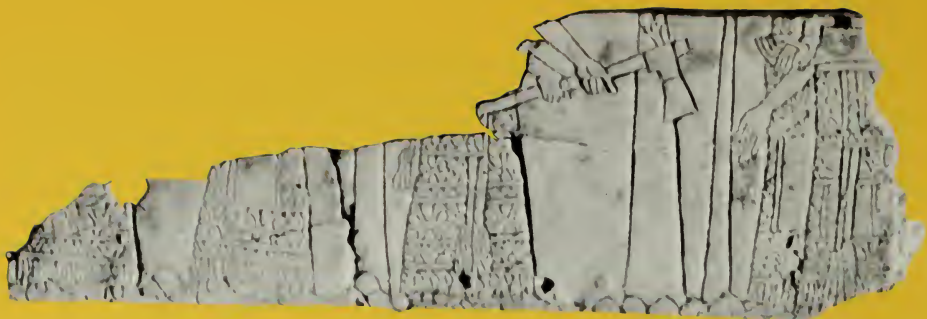
Visitors entered the palace from the east, through a great outer courtyard lined with offices and storerooms, with the temple of the city's patron god Ninurta and its high ziggurat, or temple-tower, looming beyond them. On the south side of this courtyard, in a long wall decorated with carved figures of foreigners bearing tribute to the king, were three massive doorways guarded by colossal statues of winged bulls with human heads; through these doorways lay the throne room itself, a narrow hall 125 feet long, decorated with carved panels showing the king, guardian deities, and scenes of the king's military victories.

The ambassador or visiting dignitary who penetrated beyond this formal audience chamber would find himself in a huge inner courtyard, again lined with carvings; opening off each side were still more long, formal halls, suitable for religious ceremonies or for banquets of as many as one hundred people. These state apartments, Assurnasirpal's inscriptions tell us, were outfitted "in splendid fashion," with

**Facing page: Assyria in the ninth century B.C.**

**Contour map showing the position of excavated buildings on the citadel at Nimrud. The Northwest Palace is at lower left. Courtesy of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq.**





**Above: Fragment of engraved ivory panel from Nimrud. Courtesy of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq.**



**Above: *Austen Henry Layard in Native Dress*. Watercolor. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.**

**Left: Carved ivory plaque from Nimrud depicting the king in ceremonial dress. Courtesy of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq.**

doors of cedar, cypress, and other exotic woods, thrones of ebony and boxwood, and dishes of ivory, silver, and gold. Archaeologists have uncovered hundreds of fragments of intricately carved ivory panels that once decorated the royal furniture, evidence of the great luxury of the palace in its heyday.

Late in the reign, when the palace was formally dedicated, Assurnasirpal gave a banquet that lasted for ten days, at which he entertained, he tells us, 69,574 guests—Assyrian citizens and officials, foreign dignitaries, and the entire population of Kalhu. The menu included, among other delicacies, 14,000 sheep, 1,000 spring lambs, 10,000 eggs, 10,000 wild pigeons, 10,000 jugs of beer, 10,000 skins of wine, 100 containers of honey, 100 containers of onions, and 10 homers of shelled pistachio nuts.

Despite its pomp and power, Kalhu was destroyed by Assyria's enemies in 612 B.C. For centuries it lay in ruins. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that Europeans became interested in the huge mounds of earth along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and began to excavate them, uncovering the ruins of the ancient cities of Assyria and Babylonia. Kalhu was one of the first to be rediscovered, in an excavation that captured the imagination of Europe and America.

The excavation was conducted by a twenty-eight-year-old English diplomat named Austen Henry Layard, who had become convinced that mounds near the village of Nimrud might hold the remains of an important ancient city. Afraid that local Turkish officials would deny him permission to dig, Layard resorted to a ruse. He writes, "On the 8th of November, having secretly procured a few tools, and engaged a mason at the moment of my departure, and carrying with me a variety of guns, spears, and other formidable weapons, I declared that I was going to hunt wild boars in a neighboring village, and floated down the Tigris on a small raft constructed for my journey." He arrived at the site by nightfall. The following morning, November 9, 1845, with the help of seven Arab tribesmen hired nearby, Layard began digging. By midday he had uncovered a chamber lined with tall stone panels inscribed with cuneiform writing: Layard had discovered the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal at Kalhu.

In the following months Layard's energetic efforts uncovered a succession of murals, ivories, and wall carvings. "By the end of April," he reports, "I had explored almost the whole building; and had opened twenty-eight chambers



**Above: North wing of the Northwest Palace looking towards the ziggurat. Courtesy of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq.**

**Right: *Entrance to the Shrine of Ninurta.* Water-color, possibly by Frederick Charles Cooper. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.**





cased with alabaster slabs." By the time he closed his excavations in 1851, he had discovered three more palaces, an arsenal, two temples, and the walls of both citadel and city.

Layard had sent many reliefs and other artifacts from his excavations back to Britain for safekeeping and display, but he remained concerned about the safety of the many pieces left on the site. A group of American missionaries working in the area approached him to ask if they might send reliefs to institutions in the United States. One of these missionaries was Dr. Henri Byron Haskell, an 1855 graduate of the Medical School of Maine at Bowdoin College. He wrote to the Trustees of the College asking if his *alma mater* would like to have some of the carvings. The Trustees agreed, and five panels were duly sent by raft down the Tigris to India and thence by ship to America.

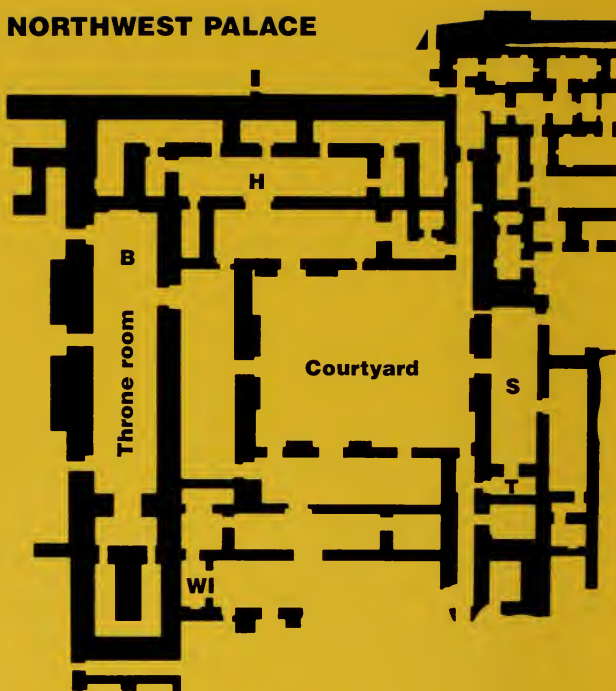
They arrived at Bowdoin in 1860, at a cost to the College of \$728.17 in freight charges, and are now the most valuable works of sculpture in the Bowdoin collections. In 1906 a sixth piece, the fragmentary head of Assurnasirpal II, was added to the collection as the gift of Edward Perry Warren h '26, the principal donor of the ancient collection at the museum.

At Nimrud there was more to come. In 1945, one hundred years after Layard's excavation, a team of British archaeologists led by Sir Max Mallowan reopened the excavations. Their work, and that of later teams of Iraqi and Polish archaeologists, has given us a much clearer picture of what life was like in the ancient city. In the Northwest Palace, these excavations have provided clues to where the now scattered wall carvings were originally located and to how each carved panel functioned in the elaborate decorative program of the palace as a whole.

The excavations have established that the public rooms of the palace were lined with large stone panels carved with images of the king, of supernatural guardian figures, or of scenes involving a symbolic tree. The carvings in a few rooms also showed scenes of war or the royal hunt. In addition, each panel carried an inscription, today known as the Standard Inscription of Assurnasirpal, which was repeated throughout the palace—on some 310 slabs. This text, carved in the wedge-shaped writing called cuneiform and written in the Akkadian language, gives us a glimpse of the power that the Assyrians wielded from their capital at Kalhu, and the splendor of the great palace that Bowdoin's bas-reliefs once adorned. It reads, in part:

## NORTHWEST PALACE

Plan of the North-  
west Palace at  
Nimrud.



Below: *Winged, Bird-  
headed Figures Fac-  
ing a Stylized Tree.*  
Gypsum panel from  
the Northwest  
Palace, Nimrud.  
Bowdoin College  
Museum of Art.

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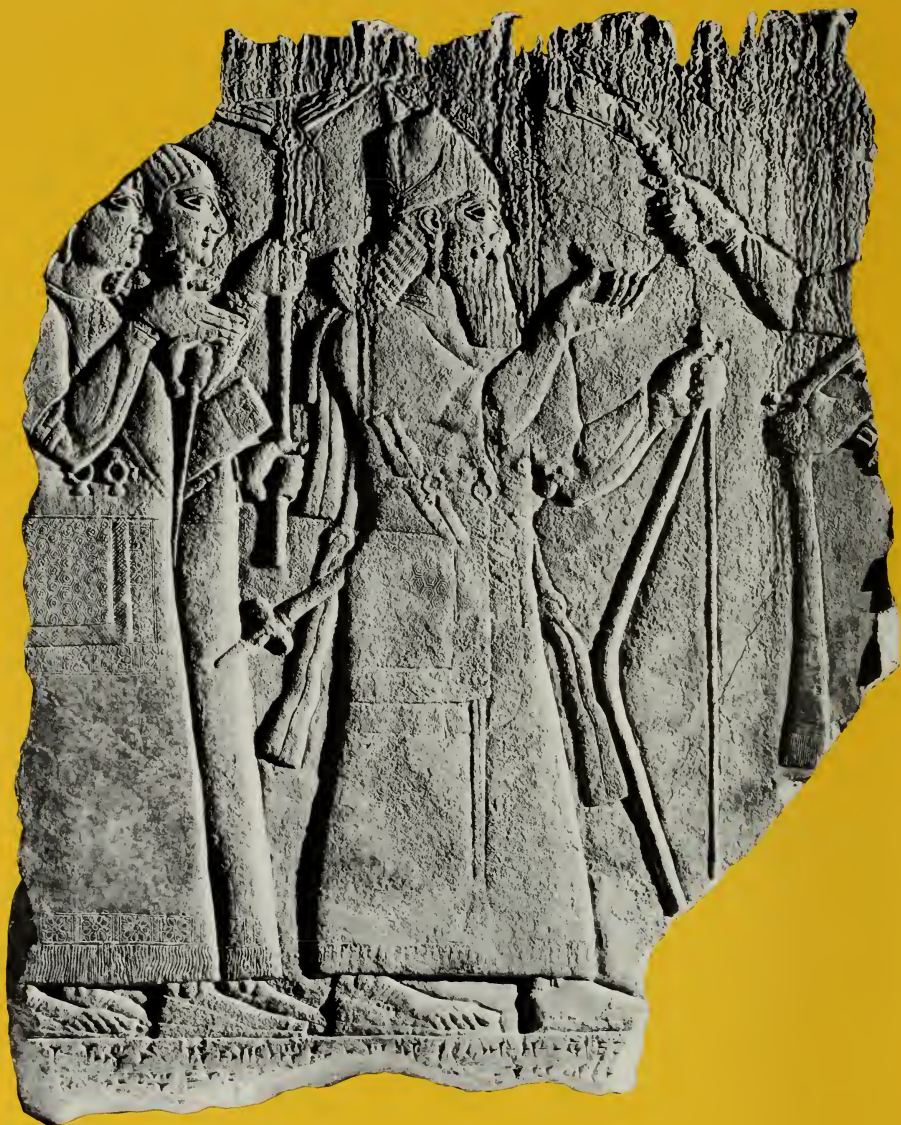
"The ancient city Kalach which Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, a prince who preceded me, had built—that city had become dilapidated; it lay dormant. I rebuilt that city. I took people which I had conquered from the lands over which I had gained dominion, from the land Suhu, [from] the entire land of Laqu, [from] the city Sirqu which is at the crossing of the Euphrates, [from] the entire land of Zamua, from Bit-Adini and the land Hatti and from Lubar-na, the Patinean. I settled [them] therein. I cleared away the old ruin hill [and] dug down to water level. I sank [the foundation pit] down to a depth of 120 layers of brick. I founded therein a palace of cedar, cypress, *daprānu*-juniper, box-wood, *meskannu*-wood, terebinth, and tamarisk as my royal residence [and] for my lordly leisure for eternity. I made [replicas of] beasts of mountains and seas in white limestone and *parītū*-alabaster [and] stationed [them] at its doors. I decorated it in a splendid fashion; I surrounded it with knobbed nails of bronze. I hung doors of cedar, cypress, *daprānu*-juniper, [and] *meskannu*-wood in its doorways. I took in great quantities and put therein silver, gold, tin, bronze, iron, booty from the lands over which I gained dominion."

The inscription served as a sort of generic caption; it described the king's qualities and achievements, while each carving presented a part of that message pictorially—the king as warrior, the king as priest, the gods' protection of Assyria, and so on—for a society in which few people could read.

Although scholars can now decipher the written message, the carved scenes still make important contributions to our understanding of Assurnasirpal's world; they offer us glimpses of the people who moved through the palace and glimpses of the supernatural beings that they believed to be there with them. In addition, the scenes chosen for each room offer clues to that room's function.

The panel at Bowdoin showing bird-headed figures facing a stylized tree, for example, has now been identified as one of a series of panels lining a large inner room of the Northwest Palace (Room H on the palace plan). These supernatural figures, joined in this room by images of the king, of other winged spirits, and of symbolic trees, suggest that Room H may have been used for some of the many religious ceremonies that the king performed. Although there is still debate about the identity of the bird-headed creatures, statues of similar figures have been discovered beneath the floors of Assyrian houses, and Assyrian texts advise the use of them to protect against evil spirits. Perhaps the bird-men carved on the walls of the palace were meant as supernatural guardians.





***King Assurnasirpal  
II Holding Bow and  
Drinking Bowl, with  
Attendants. Gypsum  
panel from the  
Northwest Palace,  
Nimrud. Bowdoin  
College Museum of  
Art.***



The bird-headed creatures flank a stylized date-palm tree, important as a source of food in Mesopotamia. The creatures reach forward in a stiff and ceremonial gesture, holding out toward the tree an oval object whose shape resembles the flower cluster of the date-palm. Since date-palms must be cross-pollinated by hand to ensure a good crop, this scene may represent a symbolic cross-pollination of the tree by supernatural beings, and thus the gods' gift of abundance to mankind. The niche cut in the top of the panel let air and light into the room from a nearby courtyard or from openings in the roof, and may also have served as a storage shelf.

The small relief showing the king (identified by his tapering hat and streamers) with sword and bow, followed by attendants, probably comes from a small inner chamber of the palace (Room WI on the plan), a room decorated with scenes of royal activities—war and perhaps a lion hunt. The fact that the room was equipped with a drain suggests that it may have been used for rituals of washing and purification. In the scene shown here, the king, faced by an attendant with fly whisk and towel and followed by an official in an ornate “reversed apron” and by an attendant holding a parasol, seems about to pour a libation from the drinking bowl in his right hand, perhaps as thanks for a successful hunt.

Two of the Bowdoin reliefs depict a single winged protective spirit wearing the horned cap that was a mark of divinity. Like the bird-men, both figures carry a small bucket in one hand and an oval object—probably representing a date-palm flower cluster—in the other. One of the figures (from Room T on the plan) is shown, like the bird-men, facing a stylized date-palm tree. These common elements suggest that all of the winged figures represent benevolent spirits making a gesture meant to confer blessing and fertility. The winged figure who appears without a stylized tree faced a doorway in one of the great inner halls (Room S on the plan), reaching out as if to bless people who passed through the doorway before him. On the tunic and shawl of this figure, the artist has carved intricate patterns of embroidery or weaving, showing kneeling bulls, cedar trees, rosettes, palmettes, and pomegranate fruits. The heavy musculature of the legs is a convention of Assyrian carving throughout the Northwest Palace.

On another bas-relief at Bowdoin the king is again shown with sword and bow, attributes of his roles as warrior and hunter. A winged protective spirit follows him, its hand extended toward him in a gesture of blessing. The carving has been disfigured by broad gashes across the



**Above: King Assurnasirpal II with Bow, Followed by Winged Figure. Gypsum panel from Nimrud. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.**



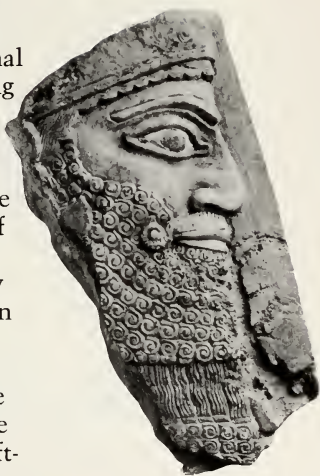
**Right: Winged Figure with Embroidered Tunic and Shawl. Gypsum panel from the Northwest Palace, Nimrud. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.**

faces and wrists of the two figures, perhaps done by enemy soldiers during the fall of the city in 612 B.C. The figure sketchily carved on the right, facing the king, is another unusual feature of the panel. It was not part of the original composition, since no raised stone was left for the carving of the lower body, but we have no evidence of the date—ancient or modern—when this figure was added to the panel. The cuneiform signs on this panel are unusually large, and the text varies somewhat from that used on the other Northwest Palace panels, indications that this relief may have come from a different building on the site.

The fragmentary head of Assurnasirpal is a particularly important piece, recently identified as the missing section of a three-paneled bas-relief facing the main public entrance to the palace throne room (Room B on the plan). This relief confronted a visiting dignitary or official as he entered the throne room, just before he turned to face the enthroned king. The fragmentary head was part of the left-hand panel, which shows the king and his weapon bearer advancing toward a central panel. In the central panel the king, followed by winged figures, raises his hand toward the symbolic tree over which hovers the figure of a god, probably Assur, chief god of Assyria.

An unusual feature of this fragment is the traces of black paint on the hair and beard and of white paint on the eyes—rare survivals of the bright color used to bring out details on some of the carvings. Although most Assyrian wall carvings now appear a uniform gray, Layard reports that he could distinguish traces of color “on the hair, beard, and eyes, on the sandals and bows, on the tongues of the eagle-headed figures, and very faintly on a garland round the head of a winged priest, and on the representation of fire in the bas-relief of a siege.” In addition, he found traces of bright-colored murals fallen from the walls above the panels.

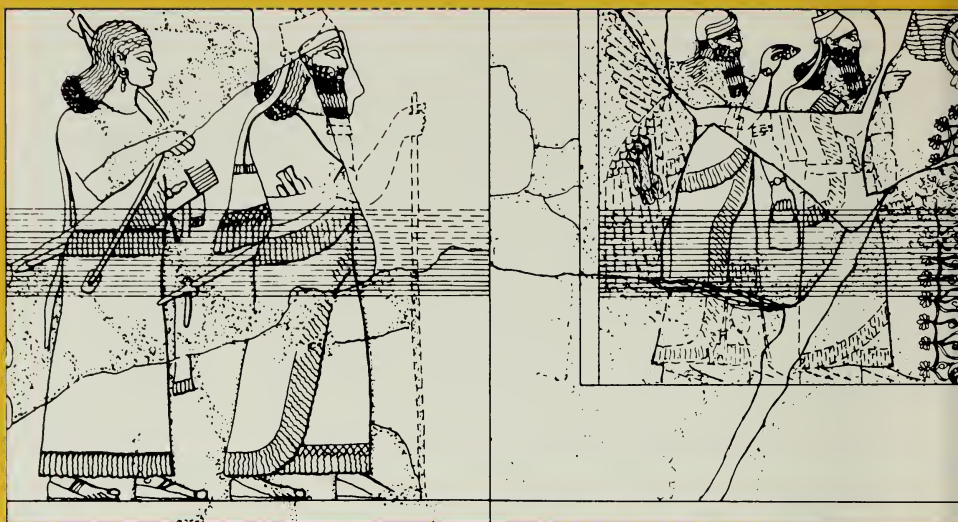
Although carved panels from the Northwest Palace are now scattered across the world in museums and private collections, some remain in the ruins—among them, the throne room relief of which Bowdoin's fragmentary head of the king was once a part. The government of Iraq, proud of the rich history of its homeland, is now in the midst of a project to restore parts of the palace and to make the ancient citadel accessible to the public as a tourist attraction. Someday soon it should be possible for travelers from Bowdoin to retrace the long journey made by the bas-reliefs in the 1850s and to visit Kalhu, to walk through the ruined corridors of the palace Assurnasirpal II once described as “the joyful palace, the palace full of wisdom.”



**Head of Assurnasirpal II of Assyria.**

**Fragment of a gypsum panel from the Northwest Palace, Nimrud. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.**



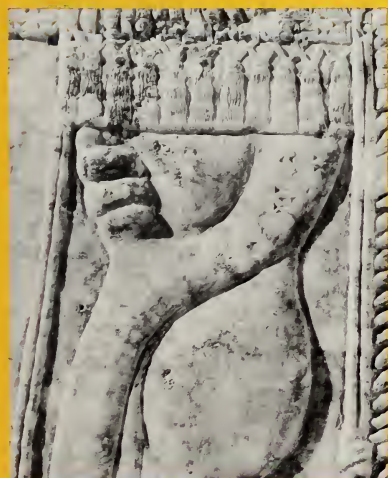
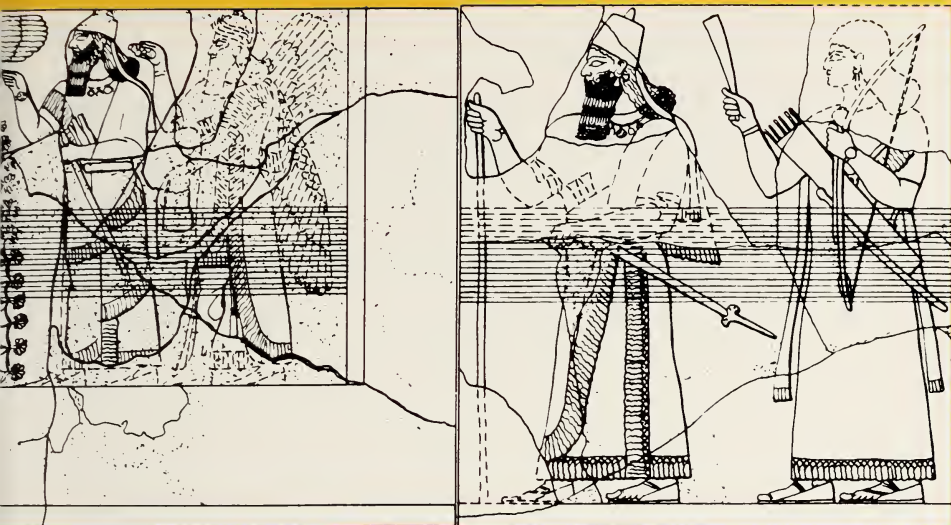


**Right: *Winged Figure with Stylized Trees.***  
Gypsum panel from the Northwest Palace, Nimrud. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

**Facing Page: *Winged Figure with Stylized Trees* (details).**







**Above: The three-paneled throne room relief to which the Bowdoin Assurnasirpal head belongs. The Bowdoin head (see previous page) comes from the left-hand panel. Drawing by R. Sobolewski in Janusz Meuszyński, *Die Rekonstruktion der Reliefdarstellungen und Ihrer Anordnung im Nord-westpalast von Kalhu (Nimrūd)*(Mainz am Rhein, 1981). Photograph courtesy Verlag Philipp von Zabern and the family of Janusz Meuszyński.**

**For further reading:**

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Barbara N. Porter received her doctorate in ancient history from the University of Pennsylvania. She lives with her husband and three children on an island in Casco Bay and is currently working on a book about the role of public image and propaganda in the political life of seventh-century B.C. Assyria.

## Dimensions

- p.8      *Winged, Bird-headed Figures Facing a Stylized Tree* 1860.1  
56 3/16 x 84 1/4 x 6 1/4 inches (142.7 x 214.0 x 15.8 cm)  
Gift of Dr. Henri B. Haskell m 1855.
- p.10      *King Assurnasirpal II Holding Bow and Drinking Bowl,  
with Attendants* 1860.5  
35 7/8 x 30 1/16 x 6 1/2 inches (91.2 x 76.3 x 16.5 cm)  
Gift of Dr. Henri B. Haskell m 1855.
- p.12      *King Assurnasirpal II with Bow, Followed by Winged  
Figure* 1860.3  
65 5/8 x 78 1/8 x 6 3/8 inches (166.8 x 198.5 x 16.2 cm)  
Gift of Dr. Henri B. Haskell m 1855.
- p.12      *Winged Figure with Embroidered Tunic and Shawl* 1860.2  
90 9/16 x 58 13/16 x 6 7/16 inches (230.0 x 149.3 x 16.3 cm)  
Gift of Dr. Henri B. Haskell m 1855.
- p.13      *Head of Assurnasirpal II of Assyria* 1906.4  
14 3/16 x 7 7/8 x 1 9/16 inches (36.2 x 20.0 x 4.1 cm)  
Gift of Mr. Edward Perry Warren h '26.
- p.14      *Winged Figure with Stylized Trees* 1860.4  
91 7/16 x 73 3/16 x 5 7/16 inches (232.2 x 185.9 x 13.8 cm)  
Gift of Dr. Henri B. Haskell m 1855.

